

The Balkans continue to fracture

Part 2

By Paul Mitchell
1 October 2004

This is the conclusion of a two-part series analysing growing instability and tensions in the Balkans. Part 1 was posted September 29.

An important consideration in European Union external affairs spokesman Chris Patten's letter was the unresolved status of Kosovo. By accelerating Montenegro's progress towards EU accession but postponing the question of a referendum on independence, he hopes this "would not interfere with the international community's timeline for the solution to Kosovo's final status".

Kosovo is marked by a 50 percent unemployment rate that government officials admit may be as high as 70 percent since many do not register. There is an escalating social crisis, as emigration is cut off and funds from abroad decline. The United Nations Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) has just announced the sale of 500 socially owned enterprises, which will lead to large-scale job losses.

Officially, Kosovo is part of Serbia and Montenegro, but the region is administered by UNMIK "pending a final settlement" of its status. This "final status" is framed as an attempt to appease both the pro-imperialist ethnic Albanian forces that supported the United States and European powers in their efforts to dismantle Yugoslavia, and the pro-western regime that was subsequently installed in Belgrade. According to Security Council Resolution 1244 the settlement involves "substantive autonomy," but also a commitment to "the sovereign and territorial integrity of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia [now Serbia and Montenegro]."

In March this year communal violence orchestrated by former Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) leaders resulted in the death of 19 people and injury to hundreds more. More than 4,000 people—mainly Serbs—were forced to flee. A leaked internal UN report said UNMIK was on "the point of near collapse."

There are conflicts amongst the imperialist powers on how to stabilise this worsening situation, with some favouring greater autonomy for Kosovo as demanded by Albanian nationalists and others considering Serbian proposals for the "cantonisation" of northern Kosovo.

The UN envoy to the Balkans, Norwegian Kai Eide, recently called for policy reversal in Kosovo and the start of talks on the final status of Kosovo. On September 7, whilst Germany's Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer was telling Germany's diplomats that the current international policy in Kosovo was working, German Defence Minister Peter Struck told a parliamentary committee that it was time to reconsider this policy—echoing statements by the opposition Free Democratic Party for Kosovo to become a protectorate administered by the EU. Struck pointed out that many troops involving much expense are needed to protect often small and isolated settlements,

and that "more consolidated" Serbian enclaves should be considered.

The US and Britain have called for faster handover of some authorities to ethnic Albanian institutions in Kosovo. US Ambassador to Serbia and Montenegro Michael Polt has said that whilst the US agrees with Eide that clarifying Kosovo's final status is vital, Washington's official policy remains the current "standards before status."

New elections are scheduled for October 23 of this year and have become the focus of intense conflict between ethnic Albanian forces pressing for full independence and Serbian nationalists seeking to maintain Kosovo's existing status.

The Democratic Party of Kosova, a successor organisation to the pro-US stooge KLA, runs Kosovo, under Prime Minister Bajram Rexhepi. Its Assembly—which, like the forthcoming elections is boycotted by the Serbs—voted on July 8 to adopt several constitutional changes, including the right to hold a referendum on independence.

The Albanian government supports these moves, with its president Alfred Moisiu recently declaring his country's interest in resolving Kosovo's final status.

Albanian nationalists are pushing for the integration of ethnic Albanian areas in the area of south Serbia known as the Presevo Valley—where 60,000 Albanians outnumber around 30,000 Serbs. The region was the scene of armed conflict in 2000 involving the Liberation Army of Presevo, Bujanovac and Medvedja (UCPBM)—a KLA offshoot.

In the Serbian municipal elections of September 19 the Albanian Party for Democratic Action made a clean sweep in the Presevo Valley. Speaking of the South Serbia Coordination Centre that acts as an assembly for the area, DPA leader Ragmi Mustafa said, "Obviously the coordination body doesn't have the same authority as before and must be transformed." Earlier this year another DPA leader, Saip Kamberi, stated that, "It is only natural that Albanians today say this region should be united with Kosovo."

In 2001, the Presevo Valley conflict was exported over the border into Macedonia by a KLA-UCPMB offshoot, the Albanian National Liberation Army (NLA), which also wanted incorporation into Kosovo.

On November 7 the Macedonian government will hold a referendum on its plans to redraw the boundaries of some municipalities to make Albanians within them a majority. The referendum threatens to upset relations between ethnic Macedonians and the approximately 25 percent Albanian minority, and endanger the 2001 Ohrid peace agreement. The Ohrid agreement was signed by the previous Macedonian government headed by President Ljubco Georgijevski of the Vmro-Dpmne party and the NLA.

The US turned against Giorgijevski's coalition when it became obvious it had no support in the country. Mass demonstrations and general strikes met attempts to privatise state assets and cut welfare provision. The western powers wanted a more compliant regime that would integrate the NLA, which a mountain of evidence suggests was secretly backed by Washington, into government structures, and to more vigorously pursue privatisation strategies.

The country now has a government headed by President Branko Crvenkovski's Social Democratic Alliance in coalition with the Liberal Democratic Party and the NLA's successor organisation, the Democratic Union of Integration.

Last year the EU took command of the NATO mission in Macedonia in Operation Concordia. Though it was a relatively small operation sponsored by Germany, France and Belgium, it was the first military operation in EU history.

The EU is also planning to take command of the much larger and more complex NATO operation in Bosnia Herzegovina (BiH) involving 7,000 NATO troops at the end of the year, although the US will maintain its base at Tuzla.

The Office of the UN High Representative set up under the Dayton Agreement to oversee BiH is being restructured and downsized, with UN High Representative Paddy Ashdown saying "my own role as EU Special Representative is growing."

Ashdown admitted, "The international community does not have an exit strategy here," but "it has an entry strategy for BiH to join Europe. And we will stay until the job is done."

BiH remains divided into the virtually independently operating Republika Srpska and Croat-Muslim Federation, both of which have Assemblies run by the same nationalist parties that came to power during the 1992-95 war. Local elections that are taking place on October 2 seem certain to reinforce that division.

Ashdown exerts all real power in the country and recently fired 60 Serb officials, including the interior minister and parliament speaker, whom he accused of helping war crimes fugitives, Bosnian Serb leaders Radovan Karadzic and Ratko Mladic.

The UN recently said that nearly half of the 2.2 million refugees from Bosnia had returned, but Udo Janz, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees representative in Bosnia added, "The situation remains volatile in many parts of the country" and 500,000 people had decided to permanently settle elsewhere.

Earlier this month there were riots in Konjevic Polje between Serbs and Muslims. Political analyst Tanja Topic told the Centre for Peace in the Balkans that war could break out again at "any time" and that "in post-war Bosnia neither local politicians, nor the international community succeeded in politically stabilising the country."

This view was shared by political and military analyst Gostimir Popovic, who said, "The current peace in Bosnia and the region is not permanent. This territory is still referred to as a 'powder keg' and very little is needed for new conflicts to emerge."

Ethnic tensions have also risen in the Vojvodina province of Serbia, which has a Hungarian-speaking minority. The province is also the home to about 220,000 Serb refugees expelled from Croatia and Kosovo. During the 1990s there was relative ethnic peace, but ethnic Hungarian parties aided by Hungary have raised the temperature there, blaming refugees influenced by the SRS. In early August, Hungary's Foreign Minister Lszl Kovcs complained of "atrocities" being committed against 300,000 ethnic Hungarians, and Interior Minister Mnika Lamperth said, "Hungary is very concerned about the increasing reports of atrocities including physical attacks and abuses,

against the ethnic kin."

Jzsef Kasza, leader of the Vojvodina Alliance of Hungarians (VMSZ), has said repeatedly the attacks were reminiscent of the ways the wars in Croatia, Bosnia and Kosovo started.

The "atrocities" cited relate to 67 incidents including graffiti and defacing tombstones linked to the SRS reported by the Serbian Interior Ministry. The Hungarian government claims the number of incidents is closer to 300 and called for the "internationalization" of the issue. It has suggested sanctions be imposed and a "solution to the minority issue" before Serbia and Montenegro is admitted to EU.

The two major Hungarian-American Lobby groups, the Hungarian-American Coalition and the Centre for Hungarian-American Congressional Relations, are trying to focus US policymakers on the issue. The Hungarian-born US Congressman Tom Lantos has written to Serbian Prime Minister Kostunica, and 13 Congressmen signed another letter.

Although Hungary's President Ferenc Madl later said the incidents were "the effects of the recent [Balkan] wars and the difficult economic situation" and Kroyly Pl, deputy chairman of the VMSZ, blamed the attacks on the economy's collapse and lack of opportunities for the young in particular, the Hungarian bourgeoisie still appeal to a diaspora of Hungarian speakers in neighbouring countries.

The previous Fidesz party administration introduced a Status Law in January 2002 that it saw not simply as a benefits package covering employment, health and education, but "a means of supporting self-organisation by Hungarians outside Hungary."

The Hungarian Socialist Party-Alliance of Free Democrats coalition replaced the Fidesz government in 2002 and has continued its policies in all essential aspects.

Prime Minister Pter Medgyessy said, "Hungary's political parties may debate many issues, but they have all agreed that they bear responsibility for the cause of Hungarians beyond the country's borders and that everything possible must be done in the interest of the Hungarian nation, in terms of national identity and consciousness."

His government is considering a referendum in support of granting dual citizenship to Hungarian speakers in neighbouring countries, but is wary that this would encourage emigration from poorer areas into Hungary itself

The situation in the Balkans is a bitter indictment of the western powers' intervention. Poverty, corruption and ethnic separation have become endemic in the Balkan region as a result of the attempt to dismantle the former Yugoslavia.

That intervention was carried out under the cloak of humanitarianism, but signalled the legitimisation of the naked use of overwhelming military power against small countries in pursuit of strategic of "Big Power" interests, the cynical violation of the principle of national sovereignty, the de facto reestablishment of colonialist forms of subjugation, and the revival of inter-imperialist antagonisms that carry within them the seeds of a new war.

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